

EFL Learners' Perceptions of Using Materials Containing Local Culture to Teach Reading

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Abstract—This study explored EFL learners' perceptions of teaching reading using materials containing local culture. Fifteen students were purposively chosen from different senior high schools in Lombok, Indonesia. The participants were selected using purposive sampling. However, the sample was limited in size and comprised exclusively high-achieving learners, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. A total of 15 students were selected as participants. Open-ended questions were used to obtain the participants' perceptions after teaching reading using materials containing local culture. The findings revealed the significant impact of integrating local culture into reading materials for EFL learners. Their comprehension, motivation, and sense of cultural identification were strengthened by the local culture in learning. The learners' cultural environment not only made language acquisition easier but also provided a framework for a closer connection to their own heritage. The findings highlighted the importance of culturally appropriate teaching materials and demonstrated how, in EFL environments, integrating local culture can enhance language acquisition and cultural preservation.

Index Terms—EFL learner perception, teaching reading, text materials, local culture

I. INTRODUCTION

Since promoting cultural perspectives is one of the primary goals of language instruction, numerous studies conducted in the past 10 years have underlined the significance of including cultural subjects in instructional materials (Kim, 2020; McConachy, 2018; Krulatz et al., 2018). Therefore, the incorporation of local culture as a theoretically grounded principle is often associated with sociocultural theory, culturally relevant pedagogy, and contextualized language learning (Bose & Gao, 2022; Grant & Wong, 2018; Arshad et al., 2020; Babaii, 2022; Toledo-Sandoval, 2020). By doing so, teachers can improve student motivation, communicative proficiency, and awareness, all of which contribute to language learning. Chan (2021) emphasized that the integration of local culture is a fundamental requirement for effective ELT practices. Since cultures are socially constructed and influenced by both personal and communal perspectives, the four important skills of English Language Teaching (ELT) are listening (Kamaeva et al., 2022), speaking (Koroleva & Arkharova, 2023), writing (Garim et al., 2023), and reading. Addressing this gap, the integration of local culture into teaching materials is

particularly relevant for reading skills, as most previous studies have focused on local culture concerning other English skills in a global context. The studies have not addressed its role in teaching reading. Therefore, this study aims to investigate reading materials integrated with the local culture of the Sasak people in Indonesia.

In the Indonesian context, several studies have investigated reading materials integrated with local culture. For instance, Razavi and Gilakjani (2020) examined the effect of teaching cultural content on Iranian intermediate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' reading comprehension. Saputri et al. (2022) investigated the other level of intensive reading coursebooks to include critical thinking skills, dispositions, and knowledge, which were elaborated in the coursebook in the form of texts, activities, and tasks. Hadianto et al. (2022) examined the effectiveness of a literacy teaching design that integrates local cultural discourse and practices to enhance the reading skills of adults in Indonesia. Sudarwati et al. (2023) posited that critical activities to promote English reading learners' social and multicultural perspectives are becoming increasingly essential in this global and interconnected world. Damaianti et al. (2017) developed a set of culturally oriented critical reading materials to counter the diminishing sensitivity of society, particularly among students, toward the noble values of religion, customs, and culture. Through this material, students gain significant critical insights into discourses reflecting the noble values of Indonesian culture. Additionally, Sukarno (2012) integrated local cultures, including moral values and cultural content, into their teaching practices. Rasmayanti et al. (2022) investigated the validity, practicality, and effectiveness of interactive multimedia for teaching reading comprehension of narrative texts based on local culture from South Sumatra. Furthermore, Alwi et al. (2024) explored the impact of a socio-culturally based digital teaching module on the beginning reading skills of primary school students. This study employed a quasi-experimental design, with the experimental group learning through socio-cultural digital modules while the control group used conventional teaching methods. Despite several Indonesian studies that have explored reading materials integrated with local culture, most have primarily adopted quantitative research methodologies, resulting in insufficient data to fully address the research findings. Therefore, there is a need to supplement these studies with qualitative data through qualitative research methods. The cultural contexts examined in prior studies differ from the focus of the present study, which specifically investigates Sasak culture in Indonesia through narrative texts.

The understanding and learning of English language skills depend on readers' ability to relate sentence meanings within scientific texts. Therefore, this study aims to highlight how local text cohesiveness influences EFL learners' comprehension. As Hall et al. (2015) state that the degree to which a text aids the reader in developing a coherent understanding is known as text coherence. According to Graesser et al. (2004), when a text possesses high cohesiveness, the reader can typically understand the arguments presented solely from the text itself. In contrast, Foltz (2012) notes that low-coherence texts require readers to draw conclusions beyond what is explicitly stated to form a coherent understanding of the text's meaning. Gasparinatou and Grigoriadou (2013) argue that the focus on text cohesion is justified by investigations indicating that scientific textbooks frequently lack coherence and often omit essential details necessary for accurate comprehension. Addressing the gap identified in these findings, most studies on teaching reading materials globally have concentrated primarily on text cohesiveness. However, integrating local culture into teaching materials can enhance EFL learners' comprehension of text meanings, as they possess prior knowledge related to the content of the text, which is relevant to their own culture. Furthermore, failing to familiarize EFL learners with their own culture through teaching materials may lead to cultural disconnection. To address these research gaps, the following two research questions are formulated:

1. What are the EFL learners' perceptions of teaching using reading materials containing local culture?
2. Why should local culture be integrated with the reading materials for EFL learners?

II. METHODOLOGY

This study employed qualitative methods to explore EFL learners' perceptions of reading materials containing local culture. As stated by Creswell and Creswell (2023), qualitative methods demonstrate a different approach to scholarly inquiry compared to quantitative research methods. Although the processes are similar, qualitative methods rely on text and image data, encompass unique steps in data analysis, and involve diverse procedures. Furthermore, qualitative research is interpretative in nature; the researcher is typically engaged in sustained and intensive experience with the perceptions of the participants. This approach was employed to better understand EFL learners' perceptions of teaching materials.

The participants were selected from a population of 200 EFL learners from different schools during the most recent semester. A total of 15 students were selected as participants using purposive random sampling based on specific criteria: (1). have completed a reading course integrated with local culture; (2). have a score of "A" or above (85% or higher) in said reading class; and (3). be enrolled as senior high school students. Consequently, the sampling method used was homogeneous sampling. As stated by Davis (2015), homogeneous purposive sampling involves selecting individuals based on specific characteristics or attributes that are consistent among them.

According to Boog (2005), purposive sampling is precisely what the term suggests: members of the sample are chosen with a specific purpose to represent a certain location or type concerning key criteria. Ritchie et al. (2003) noted that decisions regarding the criteria for selection in purposive sampling are often made during the early design stage of the research. Although purposive sampling involves deliberate choices, it does not imply bias in the selection process. Instead, it emphasizes the necessity for clear objectivity, ensuring that the sample is robust and stands up to independent scrutiny.

Open-ended questions consisting of six items were used to collect detailed information about EFL learners' perceptions following the teaching of reading materials integrated with local culture. This was conducted with teachers to gather comprehensive insights into EFL learners' experiences, challenges, and perceptions regarding the integration of local culture into reading materials. EFL learners were simultaneously engaged to understand their responsibilities and responses to these materials. To clarify, the research questions are presented in Table 1 as follows:

TABLE 1
RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

Research Instruments
What is your opinion on reading texts or stories that incorporate elements of folk culture?
Do you believe that becoming knowledgeable about traditional culture improves your comprehension of reading?
Since you began reading literature that features local culture, have you noticed any improvements in your reading skills? Please provide an explanation.
How does reading about traditional culture impact your perception of your own heritage and culture?
Could you describe a time when you learned something important about your culture or had your viewpoint altered by reading a book about local culture?
What challenges do you have when reading in English, and how may using local knowledge help you get beyond these challenges?

The information obtained through open-ended questions was then categorized using a conceptual framework related to the inclusion of local culture in reading materials, its perceived benefits, and the challenges faced by EFL learners. This procedure involved organizing the data into specific themes and structures (Schreier, 2024). The open-ended replies were subjected to a theme analysis using a methodical categorizing technique. The open-ended responses were analyzed using a thematic analysis framework grounded in the six-phase model proposed by (Braun et al., 2023). In view of the small, homogeneous sample comprising exclusively high-achieving EFL learners (i.e., students who achieved a minimum grade of "A" or $\geq 85\%$ in the reading course), the analysis was purposefully oriented toward eliciting in-depth patterns of meaning within this specific participant cohort. The analytical procedure commenced with systematic data familiarization, whereby all responses were transcribed and repeatedly reviewed to establish a comprehensive understanding of the dataset. This was followed by inductive code generation, during which analytically meaningful units reflecting learners' perceptions, experiential accounts, and evaluative judgments regarding the integration of local culture into reading materials were identified. The resulting codes were subsequently examined and organized into preliminary themes by identifying conceptual and semantic relationships. These candidate themes were then subjected to iterative review, refinement, and definition to ensure internal consistency, analytical clarity, and alignment with the study's research objectives. The final phase entailed the systematic construction of a coherent thematic narrative that articulated both convergent and divergent perspectives among high-performing EFL learners.

III. RESULTS

The data obtained from the open-ended questions revealed positive responses and a correlation between reading books on local culture and improvements in understanding culture, language, and one's sense of self. Numerous participants reported that reading stories based on folk knowledge enhanced their understanding of their history and culture.

Regarding question number 1, "What is your opinion on reading texts or stories that incorporate elements of folk culture?", the EFL learners' responses can be summarized as follows:

Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, and 15 said, "It is good and interesting because I know some stories," while participants 7 and 14 said, "I can be highly motivated for my learning in reading materials." Participant 10 said, "It can help me to understand the story," and Participant 11 declared, "I like the teaching materials because they inspire me to learn my culture." Finally, participants 12 and 13 said, "It is good because most of the teaching text materials involve my own culture".

Each respondent identified the teaching of reading materials containing local culture as interesting for discussion in English language instruction, particularly concerning reading skills. Most students expressed a dominant boredom with reading texts that do not incorporate local culture, indicating their preference for reading and understanding materials that are culturally relevant. This suggests that local culture should be integrated into teaching materials.

Regarding the second question, "Do you believe that becoming knowledgeable about traditional culture improves your comprehension of reading?", the EFL learners' responses are as follows:

Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 11, 12, and 15 said, "Yes, I do, because I know the story," while Participant 5 declared, "Yes, I do. Traditional wisdom improves my comprehension of the reading because I have learned the wisdom story before." Meanwhile, Participant 7 said, "Yes, because it enriches my reading comprehension and gives me a more nuanced understanding of the text." Moreover, Participant 8 said, "Yes, it makes me more competent when reading traditional wisdom," while Participant 9 said, "Yes, I do. By learning reading comprehension, including local wisdom, it helps me to understand the story, and I can answer the questions. Participant 10 answered, "Yes, I do. Traditional wisdom improves my comprehension of the reading because I have learned the Indonesian story before." Meanwhile, Participant 13 answered, "Yes, I believe it can improve my reading comprehension in understanding my experience with the text," and Participant 14 said, "Yes, because it enriches my reading comprehension, giving me a broader and better understanding of the text".

Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 11, 12, and 15 indicated that reading the text integrated with local culture in advance made the procedure simpler and more significant because they were familiar with the story. Meanwhile, Participants 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, and 14 mentioned that their background knowledge enhanced their comprehension of the texts, as well as their ability to anticipate and deduce the meanings of new terms, which improved their overall reading comprehension. Thus, the integration of local culture into English reading materials provided a realistic and contextual framework that facilitated EFL learners' understanding of the teaching materials.

The EFL learners' responses to the question, "Since you started reading literature that features local culture, have you seen any gains in your reading abilities? Kindly provide an explanation," are as follows:

Participants 1, 2, and 4 said, "No, I have not, because the story is interesting and real." Participant 3 answered, "Yes, I have. When I read the story about local wisdom, I knew how to express the words that appeared in the text because I knew the stories beforehand." Participants 5 and 10 both said, "It helps me to know the local stories of my hometown," while participant 6 answered, "Yes, I get it, it makes me interested to know the meaning of the text," and Participant 7 said, "Yes, it can enhance my understanding." Participant 8 responded, "Yes, I find many gains in my reading abilities," while Participant 9 stated, "Yes, by reading literature in local wisdom through stories I already know about makes it easy for me to guess the meaning of the sentence." Participant 11 said, "Reading literature can be enriching for reading ability because I am interested in reading." Participant 12 replied, "Yes, I have. I don't understand the meaning of words." Participant 13 said, "Yes, I believe it can improve my reading comprehension in understanding my experience with the text," and Participant 14 replied, "Yes, it can hone my interpretation." Finally, Participant 15 said, "Yes, I get it. It makes me interested to know the meaning of the text.

Three participants answered "No," although their reasons were positively related to local culture. Meanwhile, most participants responded "Yes," providing positive reasons connected to local culture concerning their reading abilities. The interviews also highlighted the motivational value of integrating local culture into the classroom. This indicates that culturally appropriate content can serve as a motivator, helping students who might otherwise struggle with language learning to engage more actively in the process and making it less intimidating.

The EFL learners' responses to the question about the teaching of reading materials integrated with local culture, "How does reading about traditional culture impact your perception of your own heritage and culture?" are presented in the descriptions below:

Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6 said, "We learn the story or are told the story that we did not know before, so we have an idea of our culture. Participants 5 and 10 responded, "It has many impacts, such as I know the history about the local story from my hometown, so if I meet a foreigner and they ask me about that, I can explain it to them." Participant 7 said, "The story often happens in real-life situations, so from it, I can learn how to solve my problem," while Participant 8 replied, "It can help me know the history about something or some places." Participant 9 said, "I can try to show the identity of my culture," while Participant 11 stated, "It can help me know my culture." Participant 12 continued the thoughts about culture, saying, "I learned about some cultures that I didn't know about before. Meanwhile, Participant 13 declared, "I can create a sense of pride." Participant 14 replied, "It is because part of the continuum that transmits cultural practice," and Participant 15 said, "It can give us a chance to read and know about our heritage and culture".

Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6 expressed similar responses regarding the importance of preserving their culture. Meanwhile, several participants discussed how local culture had significantly influenced their daily lives, while others conveyed a sense of pride in their heritage. It was indicated that traditional culture helped them feel prouder of their identity and more connected to their cultural background as they learned about their heritage.

The fifth question concerning the teaching of reading materials integrated with local culture, "Could you describe a time when you learned something important about your culture or had your viewpoint altered by reading a book about local culture?" elicited the following responses from the EFL learners:

Participants 1, 2, 4, and 10 said, "When I read the story about Lombok heritage, I learned the history and cultures of the kingdoms of Lombok," whereas Participant 3 stated, "I know how the culture affects our lives." Furthermore, Participants 5, 6, 9, 13, and 15 said, "It is very important to know because there are many cultures in my town that have been lost step-by-step. Participant 7 stated, "It becomes part of the continuum that transmits cultural practice," and Participant 8 replied, "By reading stories from Putri *Mandalika*, I found the word value because Putri Nyale does not want to see how many people are tested, so she makes a big decision that causes her to go on forever." Participant 11 responded, "Yes, it is strengthening a connection to heritage. It can be growth, identity, value, and behavior," and participant 12 said, "I know about the story of *Cupak Gerantang* in English." Lastly, Participant 14 said, "The strange often happens in real-life situations, so I can learn about how to solve my problem".

The ease of comprehension when reading well-known stories was another recurring element in the interviews, as mentioned by Participants 1, 2, 4, and 10. Even though the text was in English, Participants 5, 6, 9, 13, and 15 stated that having read the stories before made it simpler for them to understand the topic. Additionally, other participants emphasized the importance of the narrative framework for language learners. This research suggests that students benefit from materials that reflect their cultural background, as such materials make the content more relatable and easier to comprehend.

The responses of the participants to the question, "What challenges do you have when reading in English, and how might the use of local culture help you overcome these challenges?" can be illustrated in the following answers:

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This section describes the EFL learners' perceptions of teaching reading materials integrated with local culture and the reasons why local culture should be integrated into such materials for EFL learners.

Based on the students' responses to the open-ended questions, most EFL learners highlighted the significance of cultural integration in resources for English Language Teaching (ELT). It can be argued that reading materials can potentially be integrated with local culture. This perspective is supported by Turkan and Çelik (2007), who note that language teachers are provided with specific methods for integrating culture into their classrooms and for supplementing their textbooks with cultural elements. As an implication, they offer a practical unit plan that includes three lessons demonstrating how to teach about American holidays. These sample lessons illustrate one of the creative approaches for teachers to incorporate culture into their classrooms. Furthermore, Pailliotet (2003) highlights that there is a growing movement in the United States toward implementing similar instructions. Advocates for the use of media literacy and popular cultural texts to enhance students' understanding in U.S. schools come from diverse backgrounds, including educators across all subjects and levels. However, Regalado et al. (2024) emphasized the importance of culturally diversifying reading and writing texts, strengthening students' identities through the curriculum, fostering community in postsecondary classrooms, supporting students' mother tongues, ensuring diverse faculty representation, and promoting asset-based narratives in developmental education. Implications for asset-focused research and practice are discussed within postsecondary literacy contexts. This study expands on previous findings by demonstrating that, particularly in the Lombok area of Indonesia, integrating local culture into reading materials fosters a deeper connection to cultural identity while also aiding language comprehension.

The following reasons address the research findings regarding the motivational aspects and the contribution of prior knowledge to reading comprehension among EFL learners when appropriate cultural content is integrated. This aligns with previous research by Harris et al. (2006), which highlighted the need for more investigation in this area. The limited body of literature concerning students primarily identifies academic deficiencies instead of exploring programming that may strengthen reading skills in this population. Duke and Block (2012) found that when students can make connections between new and prior knowledge, their comprehension improves. The participants in their study reported that their familiarity with the cultural narratives presented made it easier for them to understand the texts. This finding also supports Hall et al. (2015), who claimed that familiarity and consistency in the text are essential for successful comprehension, particularly in scientific writing. This current study emphasizes the advantages of cultural familiarity within the context of EFL instruction. It demonstrates that when reading materials reflect the students' own cultural experiences, they become more motivated to learn English. This implies that, particularly in multicultural and multilingual contexts, incorporating local culture into English Language Teaching (ELT) materials may be an effective strategy for maintaining students' interest.

Another argument is that the incorporation of local culture into reading materials has the potential to facilitate interdisciplinary learning, as indicated by this research. This finding supports the assertion made by Asmayawati et al. (2024) that local culture can serve as a platform for imparting broader moral and social norms. Additionally, the participants in this study expressed concerns about cultural resilience in the face of globalization, which aligns with the findings of Graham (2018), who discussed how local values can strengthen community resilience against external forces. This study demonstrates that integrating local culture into teaching materials can provide communities with a means to combat cultural change and preserve their identity and values in an era of globalization. Furthermore, the researchers could explore effective strategies for guiding teachers in incorporating local culture into the curriculum, thereby enabling the benefits identified in this research to be applied across various educational contexts.

Another gap in the literature is the importance of technology in integrating local culture into EFL materials, particularly in online or blended learning environments. Future research could examine digital tools to enhance the intelligibility and impact of culturally relevant content. Furthermore, while the study indicates that local culture strengthens cultural identity, it lacks reliable methods for assessing this growth, highlighting the need for established assessment techniques. Given that the current study focuses on a rural context, it is also important to understand how the integration of local culture may differ between urban and rural learning environments. Additionally, while the potential of culturally relevant texts to facilitate knowledge transfer among generations is mentioned, it has not been thoroughly examined, emphasizing the need for further research on how these materials may help preserve local culture and address cultural gaps. These gaps present opportunities for additional research aimed at enhancing the understanding of how to integrate local culture into EFL learners' classroom education.

The current study has demonstrated the significant influence the EFL learners felt by integrating local culture into reading materials for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. The use of local cultural narratives in EFL instruction has strengthened learners' comprehension, motivation, and sense of cultural identity. The familiar cultural environment not only facilitated language acquisition but also provided a framework for a deeper connection to their own heritage. The study emphasizes the necessity for teacher preparation programs to include strategies for incorporating local culture into EFL courses and highlights the critical role that teachers play in implementing culturally relevant resources. By doing so, teachers can promote the preservation of local culture as well as linguistic development, particularly in multicultural and multilingual environments that are experiencing rapid globalization.

Furthermore, the study revealed several gaps that require further investigation. Subsequent research could explore the long-term effects of integrating local culture on EFL learners' academic achievement and the development of their cultural identities across various linguistic domains, including reading comprehension, discourse, and listening. Additionally, assessing the effectiveness of professional development programs and teachers' preparedness to provide relevant instruction in this context is essential. The implications of this study suggest that integrating local culture into EFL reading materials offers an effective approach to enhancing language acquisition and supporting cultural sustainability. This strategy not only assists EFL learners in achieving academic success but also emphasizes the preservation of cultural heritage, highlighting the importance of education in maintaining cultural diversity in an increasingly globalized society.

Despite the contributions of this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. The sampling strategy was confined to a specific educational context and involved a relatively homogeneous group of EFL learners, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to more diverse EFL populations. As a result, the extent to which the outcomes can be transferred to different linguistic, cultural, or institutional settings remains uncertain. Additionally, the study focused primarily on short-term instructional outcomes, thereby restricting insights into the long-term impact of integrating local culture on learners' language development and cultural identity formation. These limitations suggest the need for future research by employing larger, more diverse samples across multiple contexts and longitudinal designs to strengthen external validity and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the pedagogical effectiveness of culturally integrated EFL reading materials.

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